
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ellen LaFleche: Two Poems

Ellen LaFleche · Wednesday, October 28th, 2020

A history of my five senses while sheltering alone during the 2020 pandemic lockdown

Smell:

Goulash on the burner. Beef, paprika, Vidalia onions shiver in the pot. I hover over the stove, inhale the sizzle of garlic cloves browning in butter. My lace curtains sigh like lungs, exhale the scent of mown grass and lilacs. I marinate in a hot bath while the stew simmers on low. Essential oils boil in the tub: essence of lavender, mint, and thyme in my nostrils. When I emerge from the bathroom, robed in plush red velvet, the scent of my body is summer-garden lush.

Taste:

Goulash on the plate. Paprika burns my palate, a fire of Hungarian spice. Noodles slap their buttered heat against my lips. I press a clove of garlic against my inner cheek just to savor the sting. A sip of warm water calms my taste buds. I take my time with dessert, wait for each bite of Black Forest Cake – sour cherries, bitter chocolate, sweet confectioners – to melt into delicious liquid on my tongue.

Hearing:

I sit in my chintz chair and listen to my wind chimes chiming. Spoons dance on strings, ping against each other like accidental lovers. The sound is soothing: silver cymbals clinking, clinking. My cat Simba sleep-purrs on my lap. I set my coffee cup into its saucer with the delicate click of bone china on bone china. I drink the oolong with sucks and slurps that would be rude if visitors were allowed to visit me.

Vision:

Floral wallpaper blooms in my bedroom. Rows of roses repeat and repeat: dark red blossoms just before fullest unfurling. The thorns are pleasing: tiny spikes half hidden in a cluster of feminine petals. The daisies are random, each one lit with a yellow dot of pollen. The full moon glows with the sun's remembered light. I watch it slip past my window as if tugged in its thin netting of mist. I turn off my lamp and let darkness soothe my eyes before I close them into dreaming.

Touch:

Skin hunger wakes me. My skin is starved for touch. The hairs on my arm want to rise – swaying in hallelujah joy – from their follicles. I stroke my own arm, I stroke it slow. But my arm hairs refuse to rise up singing. I turn under my flowered quilt, tossing and twisting like the widow I am. Thinking of touch is a torture. But the nerve receptors remember. How my husband rested his head on my shoulder. How he rubbed How he rubbed the bottoms of my feet in childbirth. How he walked his finger with the slow reverence of a spiritual seeker down my spine’s cobblestone path.

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When I Jumped out the Window of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

I did not soar like a bird.
 Never mind what the witness said.
 I did not swoop with grace on currents of air.

I dropped straight down.
 Think of a girl weighted with stones
 and thrown from a turret.

I might have flown like a bird
 that slow moment when my shirtwaist billowed
 and my sleeves filled with smoke.
 When fire flared from my shoulders.

Never mind what the writer wrote.
 The fire did not caress me,
 did not kiss my scalp, my lovely legs.
 The flames made me scream. The burning hurt.

Never mind what the witness heard.
 I did not sing a Christian hymn when I stepped from the ledge.
 Did not sing songs of godly praise.

I might have sung my sister’s name. *Rosa*.
 She worked the machine next to mine.
Rosa. Her name was *Rosa*.

Never mind what the writer wrote.
 Rosie did not look like a soaring bird.
 Even when her shirtwaist billowed.
 Even when feathers drifted from her hat.

Believe what my father said.
 Rosa dropped like an anvil through the firemen’s net.
 Our brother knew it was Rosa by the heel of her boot.

Our mother might have covered my shadow with her coat.

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